AFTER ‘BREXIT:’ THE WESTERN BALKANS IN THE EUROPEAN WAITING ROOM

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Abstract: The European enlargement process in the western Balkans is in trouble. This paper starts by briefly reviewing the much debated, and quite well known, ‘enlargement fatigue’ the European Union (EU) has been experiencing largely, but not exclusively, as a result of the post-2008 economic, financial and political crisis in Europe. While this crisis has slowed considerably the EU enlargement process, the post-2016 ‘Brexit’ risks postponing it indefinitely. Second, it notes how a less known, but equally important, version of the enlargement fatigue is found in western Balkan states where various levels of Euroscepticism, or Euro-fatigue, have been developing. Third, and finally, the paper discusses some alternatives to the western Balkans’ integration into the EU, including the development of a ‘privileged partnership,’ various forms of ‘differentiated integration,’ and the construction of a ‘macro-region.’ Overall, we argue that the EU’s approach to the region ultimately depends on its own institutional development.

Keywords: European integration, western Balkans, enlargement fatigue, euroscepticism, differentiated integration.

INTRODUCTION

Since the early 2000s the European Union (EU) has progressively increased its economic, political and cultural links with western Balkan states, and even famously promised that the future of the region as a whole lies in its integration into the EU. Many policy analysts believe that the progressive inclusion of western Balkan states into European institutions will contribute decisively to support the consolidation of democratic institutions, post-conflict stabilisation and economic development in the region. There is some evidence that this is the case, since no major outbreak of violence has occurred over the last decade or so, while the economy has often grown at respectable rates. As this paper argues, however, the process of European integration is currently under great strain. Not only do the EU and its member states worry about managing Europe’s fragile economic recovery but also they have to deal with the potentially far-reaching economic and political consequences of the June 2016 vote in the United Kingdom (UK) in favour of leaving the EU (the so-called ‘Brexit’). In addition, western Balkan states are also experiencing their own version...
of ‘EU fatigue,’ which complicates further the relationship between the EU and the region.

The literature has produced import insights about the European integration process including, among other issues, the impact of conditionality on EU candidate states, the EU’s transformative power in the region, and the reasons for a growing sense of “enlargement fatigue.” In this paper, rather than adding to these mostly theoretical issues aimed at assessing the variables having an impact on the conditions for success of the EU integration process, we aim to examine the broad policy questions involved in the problematic relationship between the EU and the western Balkans at a time of a deep political crisis within the Union. We dissect the current situation in three steps. First, we briefly review the reasons – most of which are fairly known – of the so-called EU enlargement fatigue. Second, we discuss the Euro-sceptical views of western Balkan states which, in contrast to the EU enlargement fatigue, are much less known. Third, we tentatively explore how the current situation of crisis may play out in the relationship between the EU and the western Balkans. Forms of association with the EU short of full membership are increasingly debated and may represent the most viable short to middle term alternative to full membership. As a whole, we argue that the EU’s approach to the region ultimately depends on its own institutional development.

THE GOAL OF MEMBERSHIP

The inclusion of western Balkan states in European institutions – above all, the EU – is widely considered as the only feasible political, economic and social prospect for countries in the region. Since the early 2000s, the EU has espoused an open door policy towards the Balkans. The 2000 Feira European Council affirmed that western Balkan countries are “potential candidates for EU membership.” Three years later, in 2003, the Thessaloniki European Council went further by declaring that “the future of the Balkans is in the European Union,” and that accession to the EU would be dependant upon fulfilling the same requirements applied to Central and Eastern European (CEE) states. The Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP) became the official EU enlargement policy towards the region. The promise of association and eventual membership changed the relationship between the western Balkans and the EU since it provided the region with a set of yardsticks to use and measure

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